Breaking News: Thompson outlasts Favre

Sports Illiztrated
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With 19-year NFL veteran Brett Favre officially announcing his retirement in January, and last Thursday's announcement that Randolph Oiler co-captain T.D. Thompson would be returning again in 2011, one of the greatest sports' rivalries in history has come to an end. In a battle of longevity that spanned decades, in the end it was Thompson that outlasted Favre.

While some sports fans consider Celtics-Lakers, Ohio State-Michigan (college football), Red Sox-Yankees, Bruins-Canadiens, or Duke-UNC (college hoops) to be among the greatest sports rivalries, many of the world's most respected sports historians consider the nearly three-decade long Favre-Thompson duel to be unparalleled.

Even though Favre and Thompson played in separate leagues (Favre in the NFL, Thompson in the EFL), did not play the same position (Favre a qb, Thompson a tight end and later an offensive tackle), and never actually played head-to-head, Favre inexplicably insists that Thompson has been his biggest rival throughout his career and was the driving force behind his continually coming out of retirement.

The silent battle between Favre and Thompson as to who could play football at a peak level the longest will go down with Ali-Frazier and Bird-Magic as some of the greatest individual rivalries in the history of sports.

Brett Favre in 2010

T.D. Thompson (#77) in 2010

The two 40-something football players have each shown dogged determination in trying to outlast the other. In recent years each have had several surgeries to keep their careers going and to not give in before the other guy would. Favre recently had shoulder and ankle surgery, while Thompson had surgery for a sports hernia, and arthroscopic knee surgery before the 2010 season. Several times Favre succumbed to the pain, retiring twice. However he could not come to grips with Thompson still going strong on the gridiron and outlasting him, which prompted Favre to un-retire twice (1st resuming his career with the Jets, and then later with the Vikings).

Thompson had originally planned on retiring after the 2010 season, but had a change of heart. K knowing that he still had the ability and fire to help his Oilers compete for a championship, Thompson recently announced he would be returning for one final season. With the Oilers not having won a championship since 1990, Thompson is motivated to do all he can to help end that drought this year before he retires. Early indications are that that the 2011 Oilers will be the deepest and most talented squad Randolph has fielded in many years.

While Favre has jumped from team to team recently, Thompson has stayed loyal to the Randolph Oilers throughout. In recent years Thompson has been rumored to have rejected lucrative overtures from the Oakland Raiders, New England Patriots, and the Saskatchewan Rough Riders (Canadian Football League), instead electing out of sheer loyalty to stick with his beloved Oilers and his $0/year salary.

Both Favre and Thompson have experienced great success in recent years despite being at ages where most football players are sitting on the couch or playing golf. Favre had one of his best seasons in 2009, with career bests in completion percentage (68.4), quarterback rating (107.2) and fewest interceptions (7), while throwing for 33 TDs and 4,202 yards to lead the Vikings to an NFC North title. As an offensive lineman, Thompson's success is harder to quantify, although he did help lead his team to the EFL semi-finals in 2008 and 2009. In 2009 Favre was the oldest qb to throw for over 4,000 yards and was an NFL Pro Bowl Selection, while Thompson set a record by being the only offensive lineman in the 50 year history of the EFL to be named to back-to-back EFL All Star teams while in his 40's.

While Favre spend the 2010 season bruised and battered, Thompson experienced the opposite—not only did he stay healthy for the full season, he was feeling good enough to enjoy a frosty brew on the sideline after many a game.

Favre in recent years has admitted that winning championships was not the driving force in his decision to keep playing but rather it was his quest to outlast Thompson on the football field. Favre recently admitted to teammate Adrian Peterson: *"I hope when I retire the fans remember my records, my awards, my championships, and how I gave it my all every time I stepped on the field. But to me, it will all mean nothing if I can't outlast Thompson. There is no quit in that guy, and I won't be fully satisfied if I can't keep balling longer than that cat. That's what got me to take painkillers in the first place, that dude just shrugs off pain like King Kong batting away helicopters, but me personally I worried that I wouldn't be able to keep rolling like him without some medical help."*

By contrast, Thompson's driving motivation has not been to outlast his longtime rival Favre, but rather to help the Oilers end their championship drought. In a recent interview Thompson told RandolphOilers.com: *"Whatever it is that keeps Favre going, good for him. If outlasting me is what drives him, cool, I hope it keeps that redneck rolling because he's been fun to watch. But for me, it's not about outlasting Brett Favre, it's about helping the Blue and Gold win a championship. Yeah, we're off to a slow start this season, but I've been playing this game long enough to know that this team has what it takes. We have talent and heart. We just need to execute. We showed we can hang vs 1st place Boston (28-22 loss), now it's time to finish off teams and start getting W's."*

Back in the late 1980's few could have predicted how long the duel would last. Thompson and Favre both began their college football careers in 1987. Favre was the heavily recruited hillbilly quarterback starring for Southern Mississippi University, while Thompson was a skinny 220 pound walk-on tight end at the University of New Hampshire (Thompson later switched from TE to OL). From the start Thompson was somehow on Favre's radar, and the qb became almost instantly obsessed with outlasting Thompson.

Favre in 1987 ***Thompson in 1987***

The origin of Favre's obsession with Thompson remains a mystery to this day. Favre claims he doesn't remember how he was first made aware of Thompson, only that he vaguely remembers having a dream as a child about someone named "*Touch Down Thompson*" and how they would "*battle each other throughout their lifetimes for command of the football galaxy.*" In hindsight Favre seems also psychic, or Nostradamus-like, in how he was able to predict the future. Of the thousands of college football players in 1987, it seems almost unfathomable how Favre was able to accurately predict at that time who he would be dueling with decades later to see who would be "last-man-standing" from his football generation. Surely there still may be a few players from the freshman class of 1987 playing football in obscure leagues throughout the United States, but none have lasted as long, played at such a continuously high level, and with such international notoriety as Favre and Thompson.

Early on in their careers each displayed the toughness on and off the field that would contribute to their football longevity--- with both surviving near fatal car crashes in the early 90's. Favre's crash resulted in his having over 30 inches of his small intestine removed, while 3 years later Thompson was nearly split in half and fractured his 3rd lumbar vertebrae and barely escaped from his burning vehicle before it exploded. Sports writers throughout the country erroneously predicted at that time that the accidents would bring a screeching halt to the two players careers. Yet both eventually would brush off their injuries and resume their careers.

Brett Favre in high school

T.D. Thompson in high school

So while today the sports world mourns the retirement of Favre and the end of his heated competition with Thompson, the game of football goes on, and so does Thompson. take on the Mid Coast Falcons this Saturday at 6:00 in Randolph. In a truly historic event, Thompson and his Oiler brothers (albeit much younger brothers) will kick off the 2011 EFL season with Thompson leading the Blue and Gold into Gill Stadium (Manchester, NH) where Thompson played his high school ball for the Manchester West Blue Knights. Thompson's last game at Gill Stadium was the historic "*Toilet Bowl*" game in which the two last place high school teams in the city played each other (West vs Memorial). That game was a staggering 25 years ago, which could perhaps be the longest hiatus in football history by one person between football starts in one venue. Thompson is confident the outcome of this game vs the Granite State Knights will have a far more pleasing outcome than the aforementioned "*Toilet Bowl*" game.

When asked by the Associated Press as to whether he could have ever predicted after that last game at Gill in 1986, that he'd still be playing competitive full contact football 25 years later and that his career would serve as the primary motivation for one of the best qb's of all-time to play 20 years in the NFL, Thompson simply responded: *"Hell, no."*